DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 062 706 EA 004 279

AUTHOR Scoville, Maxine
TITLE "How To Make One Last Try To Get That Bond Issue Passed."
PUB DATE 16 Apr 72
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at National School Boards Association Annual Conventionl (32nd, San Francisco, California, April 15-18, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Boards of Education; *Bond Issues; *Community Support; Educational Finance; *Elections; Guidelines; News Media; *Public Relations; School Buildings; Speeches; *Voting

ABSTRACT

This speech traces the background of the passage of a bond issue in the Kansas City School District, Kansas, to aid other districts seeking to pass bond issues. The author sets out in chronological order the procedures that were taken to eliminate or neutralize opposition to the bond proposal. The author also notes that the board of education concentrated its efforts on identifying "yes" voters and in encouraging them to vote. (JF)

ED 062 706

"How to Make One Last Try to Get That Bond Issue Passed"

Special interest clinic presentation by
Mrs. R. W. (maxine) Scoville, President
Kansas City, Kansas Board of Education
at
National School Boards Association Convention
San Francisco, California
Sunday, April 16, 1972
7:30 p.m.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Let me first tell you what a genuine pleasure it is to speak to you today about "How to Make One Last Try to Get That Bond Issue Passed." Because of the strong public resistance to bond issue and tax levy proposals in recent years, and because ours represents one of the last success stories among larger reconstruction and rehabilitation proposals, I have been asked to tell you the Kansas City, Kansas story. I sincerely hope that there may be something in it which will be helpful to you. I hope, too, that you will forgive me for any indiscretions of immodesty, but in all honesty, the frustration and bitterness of failure, which we too have felt, make the sweetness of success difficult to conceal.

In the briefest possible language the best way to get a bond issue passed is to get enough "yes" votes to meet the legal requirement. And I don't mean that as facetiously as you might think. But before I get into the details of what we did, let me say that I seriously doubt that there is any person who would qualify as a complete expert in winning elections, and I am convinced that there is no magic formula composed of a set of activities which can be guaranteed to get the job done. Every community is a unique situation having its own problems, pressure groups, background and history, its peculiar antagonisms and its own special needs. Even within a community or a school district the peculiarities of timing and the happenstance of events which are essentially

EA 004 279

beyond the control of the Board of Education may be more important than any other single factor and more significant than any planned activity. I think you need to keep that in mind as I describe what we did.

A little over two years ago in January of 1970 voters in Kansas City, Kansas approved a $24.5 million school bond issue. Last month the Board of Education sold the last $8.5 million of the bonds at an average interest rate of 4.76%. In Kansas City, Kansas, two new high schools, one new junior high school, two large elementary schools, and four sizable elementary school additions are now in various stages of completion and a number of additional projects are rapidly moving toward the contract date. This fall we will be closing eight unsatisfactory elementary schools and within another year an urban school system which 15 years ago boasted among its facilities dozens of ancient structures will largely have been rehabilitated.

A previous bond issue proposal in October of 1967 had been defeated, and I think a little background about that is necessary. At election time in 1967 the Kansas City, Kansas school district was divided into two distinct, yet significantly different areas - the urban and industrial portions of the city with an enrollment of about 25,000 pupils and a recently annexed suburban school district with about 10,000 pupils. Both portions of the newly consolidated district had their problems, the same kinds of problems found in many of your school districts. The urban core was faced with obsolescence and decay with some overcrowding as a consequence of neighborhood congestion in low income, non-white areas. Legal limitations on bonding capacity were not a problem inasmuch as industrial valuations and other resources provided an adequate base against which bonds

could be voted. By contrast, the suburban part of the district had been faced for several years before consolidation with horrendous problems of overcrowding and an inadequate base of taxable property against which bonds could be issued. Additional schools were desperately needed in the suburban areas but there was no tax base. Consolidation of the suburban district with the city district had been a divisive issue. There were those in the suburban area who favored consolidation to provide relief from the growing tax problem caused by the inadequate property tax base. On the other hand, a sizable portion of the population in that area felt very strongly about maintaining their independence for whatever reason had caused them to move out of the urban core in the first place. Voters in the suburban area, by a very narrow margin, voted to attach themselves to the city school district. But, of course, the antagonisms were still there. And school building needs were growing in all parts of the newly expanded district.

Immediately after voters elected to combine the two districts, work was undertaken for the planning of a major effort in school building. A committee of distinguished educators from area universities spent approximately nine months in the development of general plans and directions for such a proposal as well as a study of the various educational needs of the expanded district. Late in the summer of 1967 a proposal was put in draft form and adopted by the Board of Education together with a resolution calling for a bond election to be held in October to authorize the issuance of $17 million in construction bonds.

At that point, most of the standard things which all of us do to promote a bond issue were done. A committee of 100 citizens was organized to review the

proposal, to endorse it, and to carry on various kinds of activities in support of it. Meetings of many different kinds with many different groups were held. Newspaper publicity by the page was printed. The endorsements of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club and almost every conceivable organization having a continuing interest in the community and schools were secured.

Immediately upon the announcement of the bond election, all the antagonisms which plagued the two now artificially distinct areas became involved in the discussion. Was too much advantage being given to the old district as opposed to the newly attached area? Deep scars and grudges that developed during annexation were still very real. The issue of whether or not integration was being dealt with adequately was much discussed. Everyone agreed that new school construction was necessary. Everyone agreed that bonds should be issued but the proposal failed.

There is perhaps no piece of literature written more descriptive of our situation than a piece of doggerel written by Elbert Martin in which he said:

> The school board said, "Our building plan
> Will be a high school vast and grand
> 'Twill stand upon ten blocks of land,
> The best that's built by human hand.
> Our building plan must be so grand
> That no one man can understand."
>
> The architect his plans he drew
> In black and white and brown and blue.
> And when he worked out something new
> The more he drew and drew and drew.
>
> And when he got the plans detailed,
> The plans the school board gaily hailed;
> And then they sat and wailed and wailed
> --The bond election badly failed.

The obvious question we faced at that point was, "How do we pull ourselves together and regroup for a new attack on the problem?" Having tasted blood, the hounds of opposition were, of course, in full cry demanding a thorough study by outside experts. That concession was made and approximately $20,000 was invested in a study by a nationally known consulting firm which produced about eight study reports and recommendations having a total weight of probably 15 pounds and containing recommendations which exceeded the bonding capacity of the district by approximately 250%. In addition, the recommendation called for the substantial abandonment of the urban core insofar as schools were concerned. It called for the construction of all new facilities in the outlying area with its major thrust being the construction of an educational plaza for approximately 8,000 students. The reaction of the Board's advisory committee, the Board of Education, and the community in general was loud, vigorous, and almost unanimous in its complete rejection of the proposal. It received no support in the press. It aroused the outright hostility of the Negro community in the urban core and was regarded as a financial catastrophe as well as an educational monstrosity by the white community.

The Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education promptly prepared a public statement rejecting the major portion of the report out of hand. While on the surface it appeared that the decision to employ the outstanding consulting firm may have been a disaster, in retrospect it appears as though it may have been one of the most useful actions taken. For indeed the united rejection of the report laid the groundwork for pulling the community together in support of alternative proposals. Both segments of our artificially divided

community had united against a common "enemy" - the consultants' report. And so we began to work anew, but still smarting over the defeat of our previous proposal.

Looking back with 20-20 hindsight at our defeat, I think we learned some important lessons. I am convinced now that the climate in our community was such that under no circumstances could a bond proposal have carried at that particular time. And I would suggest to you that under some circumstances perhaps we should recognize that it may not be realistic to anticipate the approval of any proposal, but at the same time it may be necessary to have such an election even though the prospects for its approval may be quite dim. It may be necessary for a community to relieve itself of its antagonisms before it can realistically face the conditions in which it finds itself and reach constructive conclusions.

And looking back, I think another important lesson we learned is that before any proposal is launched, every effort must be made to determine where the opposition may develop and to find ways of either minimizing or eliminating such opposition.

Reviewing our public information efforts in retrospect, we believe that we devoted an inordinate amount of time and space to emphasizing the negative. We think we talked too much about our plans to replace what we considered to be outmoded and inadequate facilities with the consequent reaction among many people being that we were attempting to dispose of perfectly usable buildings and to build unnecessary monuments for the future.

We learned some bitter lessons then from the defeat of our first bond proposal but we did learn from it, and after about two years of Board and

community study and soul-searching, we began making concrete plans for a second attempt - the one that was successful.

Let me then review what we consider to be the most important elements of our second and successful bond issue campaign - again, with the understanding that there is no single magic formula guaranteed to work for you. Briefly, here is what we did.

First, a "tentative school construction proposal" was very carefully and thoughtfully developed by our Superintendent, his administrative staff, and the Board of Education. The plan was much more than a simple retread of the one before. It made use of valuable information developed by the consultants' report as well as community response to both the previously defeated proposal and the rejected consultants' recommendations. The plan was educationally sound and perhaps just as important, it was politically sound. There was something for every area of the community. The tentative plan was pretty well developed by six months before the eventual election date.

The plan was then drafted in purposely tentative-looking mimeograph form detailing the nature of the problems, the proposal for various construction projects, and including extensive documentation relating to school needs. No date for a bond election was mentioned in the tentative proposal.

The Superintendent and administrative staff were then directed by the Board of Education to conduct extensive discussions with community groups and leaders to determine any ways which might be suggested of modifying the tentative proposal to better reflect community needs.

Building upon what we had learned the hard way, we sought to eliminate opposition before there was anything to oppose. At this time, still more than five months before the election date, no public announcement of a bond campaign had been made. Therefore, there was no automatic opposition from the uninformed but vocal opposing groups with which every community is blessed.

Discussion meetings were not publicized either, and so more than five months before the election many small meetings with eight to twelve very carefully selected opinion leaders from all parts of the district were held to discuss the still moldable tentative proposal and explore possible modifications.

A word about our purpose here. We were interested in obtaining community leader input to the bond issue proposal, and indeed some changes were made in the tentative plan as a result of these meetings. But equally important, we were interested in giving possible critics their chance to make recommendations at the outset. In effect, we were asking them to "speak now or forever hold your peace." Some refer to that technique as "assimilating the enemy," making them part of the establishment in a sense. And speaking as modestly as I can, I would have to say it worked beautifully. Unreasonable and irrational criticisms voiced at these very early meetings were quickly squelched by the critics' own peers, not by school administrators or school board members. And so in large measure, before the announcement of a second bond issue campaign was ever made public, we had boxed in and stifled critics of the previous unsuccessful proposal and those whom we thought might oppose the new one.

In small meeting after small meeting all over the district before any public announcement was made, influential citizens were being involved in

preliminary discussions of the proposal. They sincerely appreciated that. And six and twelve important citizens at a time were putting their stamp of approval on the tentative proposal.

Just five months before the election formal public announcement of the tentative proposal was made and the proposal was adopted by the Board of Education subject to, and let me emphasize this, subject to a sixty day waiting period to inform the public about the proposal and get public reaction to it. The Board said that after making any necessary modifications in the proposal, it would set the date for the election. Our formal public information campaign began at this time and we scheduled a number of large public meetings in various parts of the district to explain what we still carefully emphasized was a tentative proposal - one on which we were still seeking suggestions and ideas for its improvement.

A word about this step is in order, too. Remember that influential citizen support had already been obtained prior to this attempt to inform the general public. The sixty day waiting period before giving formal Board approval to the plan was another attempt to eliminate the just-before-election devastating attacks on the proposal which we felt some organizations were likely to attempt. Again, we feel this worked very well. Throughout the sixty day waiting period we received almost no objections to the proposal and after the waiting period we could very effectively say to complaining groups, "Where were you when we were asking for your suggestions?"

Two months before the election the Board of Education adopted the final school construction proposal incorporating those suggestions obtained at our

many meetings which we felt were valid. Really there were very few, but I think the important point is that the public had the opportunity to make suggestions if they wished.

Also at this time two months before the election, our public information campaign was intensified. By election day nearly 250,000 pieces of information were distributed containing bond issue information. In addition to regular monthly newsletters distributed free at the checkout counter of district grocery stores, special question and answer brochures dealing with bond issue plans in various small areas throughout the district were distributed on the theory that people are more concerned about what would happen to their area than the district as a whole. Some strictly informational materials were sent home with school children. Others were distributed at meetings and sent through the mail. Weekly one-minute radio spots dealing with problems that would be corrected by the bond issue were aired as a public service by area radio stations and our district's weekly fifteen-minute radio show featuring school news, also carried by several stations, included interviews each week with school personnel explaining the bond proposal.

Still two months before the election, a School Development Steering Committee, composed of 19 citizens representing all areas of the school district, was selected by the Board of Education for the basic purpose of helping sponsor campaign activities and secure funds for an intensive public information campaign just before the election.

Two months before the election, the exact date for the election was established. And you might be interested in our thinking there too. Our

studies had indicated that the month during which most bond election campaigns were successful was January - the dead of winter. We selected Tuesday, January 20, and the weather did not disappoint us. There were several inches of new snow on the ground and temperatures were subfreezing. We felt, and several studies agreed, that bad weather would keep more "no" voters at home than "yes" voters.

A very important part of our campaign involved direct voter contact through our school parent-teacher associations. We obtained the list of registered voters from the county election commissioner and, cross-checking with our files, we developed a list of voters having children in our schools. These were the people whom we felt were most likely to support the bond issue. Every registered voter with children in school was then contacted by volunteer parent-teacher association workers to determine his position on the bond proposal. They were specifically instructed not to get into an argument with anyone - but rather just to determine whether the individual seemed to favor the bonds or not. Undecided voters were considered as "no" votes. This was done during the two weeks immediately preceding the election. A careful file was made of all individuals indicating support and on election day every person who had indicated a positive inclination on the proposal was contacted as many times as necessary to make sure that they would actually go to the polls.

If we were running our campaign again now we would put much greater emphasis on this technique of identifying "yes" voters. We believe it was most effective. We worked only with registered voters who were parents of children in our schools, but certainly there were non-parents who should have been

contacted too. Next time we will call every registered voter, and we will make an early analysis of voter registration followed by a concerted effort to see that probable "yes" voters are registered. Often old-line politically oriented people tend to be registered in greater numbers than some younger less experienced groups of people who may be more inclined to support school bonds.

This procedure points out another important point in our campaign philosophy, and one to which I referred at the beginning of my remarks when I said you must get enough "yes" votes. Let me stress it again. We chose to concentrate our efforts strictly on identifying "yes" voters and encouraging them to vote. We very deliberately ignored those who said they would vote "no" and refused to argue with them about the proposal. Bond issues have been studied very carefully in the past few years and time after time studies indicate that the "no" vote in a community tends to remain relatively constant. The "yes" vote, on the other hand, can be manipulated by careful campaigning. General campaigning will probably increase "no" votes as much or more than "yes" votes.

Throughout the campaign close cooperation was maintained with the news media. By the time of the election many special reports had appeared on radio and television and a total of just under 4,000 column inches of newspaper space was devoted to the issue. Of that space, no more than 20 column inches were in any way negative. One of the most successful parts of the campaign many feel was a series of articles in our major local daily newspaper during the two weeks just before the election written by various fairly well-known, but not

big-name, lay persons in our community including protestant and parochial church leaders, labor leaders, PTA members, real estate representatives, automobile dealers, and others who wrote on the subject, "Yes, I Favor the School Bonds." While we had the usual endorsement of many major civic groups, we felt the personal articles helped illustrate the widespread support for the bonds.

The last point about our campaign that I would like to mention is our paid advertising campaign. The services of a local advertising agency were obtained through funds raised by the citizens committee. It is illegal in Kansas to spend tax money on school bond advertising. The advertising campaign was very short, two weeks in length, intensive, and frankly emotional in nature. Absolutely no attempt was made through paid advertising to inform the public about the proposal. We had already done that through our public information efforts. The emotional campaign featured six local elementary school students representing all ethnic groups. The students were used in radio and television commercials and in newspaper advertising repeating the theme, "Won't You Please Give Us Our Chance?" If it is fair to use emotions to sell everything from bread to automobiles, why not schools too? Response was very positive. A total of just under $14,000 was spent on all advertising activities - a very small amount compared to similar bond campaigns.

I am sure some of you will be wondering about the source of funds for such a campaign. Frankly, the steering committee made its chief effort toward fund raising from those business firms, both resident and non-resident as well as architectural and engineering firms, who might well anticipate receiving

significant gain from a positive result. Contributions of significant size were also made by the individual parent-teacher associations throughout the district, but in all candor, the largest contributions by far came from individuals who considered it as a potential business investment rather than a financial commitment to a belief in public education. While this may not be the most philosophically acceptable approach, it is, I believe, realistic and the results certainly showed it to be productive.

The result of our total campaign efforts was a record turnout for a special election and a "yes" vote of more than 54%.

This is the story of one successful school bond election in Kansas City, Kansas. We don't claim to be experts. We do think we did more things right than wrong. In the final analysis we got more "yes's" than "no's." That is what we were after, and this fall and next we will be proudly moving into our new school buildings. Thank you.